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Sinkholes halt Route 33 bridge work

Thursday, April 22, 2004

By **RUSS FLANAGAN**
The Express-Times

PALMER TWP. -- Workers closed a sinkhole-plagued section of Route 33 for about 20 minutes Wednesday to repair a depression under the road surface.

But later in the day, a potentially more significant problem emerged when a 15-foot wide, 60-foot deep sinkhole swallowed a construction debris dumpster and temporarily halted efforts to replace the northbound bridge spanning the Bushkill Creek.

The northbound section of the highway was closed after 10 a.m. and reopened before 11 a.m. so workers could repair a 3-foot wide, 10-inch deep depression, said Ronald Young, a spokesman for the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation.

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The indentation formed just north of a crossover lane that was built in January to carry northbound traffic over one of the existing southbound lanes and the creek.

Young said Wednesday morning's depression was caused by seasonal thawing and was not part of a larger sinkhole problem. He said that, during the

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spring, normal ground thaw can cause road surfaces to sink.

About 6 p.m. Wednesday, the much larger sinkhole swallowed the construction dumpster.

Young said the large sinkhole opened very quickly, and its implications on the cost and timing of the repair work cannot be determined until this morning when engineers and officials from the state Department of Environmental Protection can inspect it.

No one was working near the dumpster when the hole opened up on the north side of the Bushkill Creek, Young said. Work was halted on a new abutment for the northbound bridge after the sinkhole opened, he said.

"Unfortunately, it occurred after hours when it was getting dark," Young said.

Later Wednesday, Young said a PennDOT engineer has determined the hole can be filled with stone and the work can resume afterward, but the timing remains uncertain.

Workers who have been battling the sinkhole problem filled the smaller depression with hot asphalt and reopened the highway to late-morning traffic a short time later.

"They're used to filling in sinkholes in that area," Young said.

Young said Wednesday morning's work did not cause significant traffic delays.

Sinkholes have created havoc along the section of Route 33 for years. But they garnered more attention on Jan. 24 when one opened beneath a pier supporting the northbound Route 33 bridge spanning the stream, causing it to crack. The 34-year-old bridge has since been dismantled, and PennDOT expects to have it replaced by the end of the summer.

The situation forced officials to close the highway's northbound lanes for about two weeks while workers constructed the crossover lane. The crossover lane opened on Feb. 9.

An average of 40,000 vehicles pass over the section of Route 33 every day, Young said.

The new bridge is being constructed by Emmaus-based Nyleve Bridge Corp.

(Express-Times Easton editor Bob Carville contributed to this report.

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